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Cleanup may take 50 years

Somers tie plant a long-term task

By RICK HULL

The Daily Inter Lake

The cleanup of the former Somers tie plant site may take 50 years, test results indicate.

Environmental consultants had originally hoped to flush out creosote contamination of ground water in 10 years.

The new cleanup proposal will be the subject of a public meeting at 7 p.m. May 14 in the Somers School gym.

Creosote waste from 85 years of operations at the Burlington Northern tie plant contaminated the area, and the site was once proposed for the national priority Superfund list.

Field and laboratory tests last summer revealed that the soil is tighter than officials thought, said Jim Harris of the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund office in Helena.

That means the proposed ground-water cleanup technique — pumping nutrients and oxygen through the soil and letting bacteria consume the creosote — will take five times longer than originally estimated.

But while cleanup of the ground water is far in the future, cleanup of the soil that is polluting the ground water is expected to go twice as fast as predicted.

To speed the project, the EPA and Burlington Northern now propose to dig out the most heavily contaminated soil, which is the ultimate source of the ground-water problem. The original plan called for excavating 11,700 cubic yards; the revised plan nearly triples that, to 31,000 cubic yards.

to wait until winter, when the lake is at its lowest. The holes will be filled with clean soil.

Injection wells for ground-water cleanup probably won't be drilled until next spring.

Demolition of the tie plant is nearly finished, Harris said. Lumber from uncontaminated buildings went to the county landfill, while creosote-stained material was shipped to a hazardous-waste landfill in Oregon. Some questionable items went to the Great Falls landfill.

The steel retorts are being steam-cleaned and sold as scrap to local salvage yards.

To deal with community complaints about dust, the land-farm-

It is unknown how much time the extra excavation will knock off the potential 50-year cleanup, Harris said.

The excavated soil will be cleaned naturally by bacteria in a large "land-farm" operation. The extra soil will require larger plots — 13 acres instead of 10.

But laboratory tests, and results from a similar operation at the Paradise tie-plant site, show that the soil bacteria will consume the creosote more quickly than originally estimated, said Harris.

Rather than taking five years to bring creosote contamination down to target levels, the process should take as little as two years. With the plan calling for two applications of soil, that part of the cleanup will take less than half the original 10-year estimate.

A proposal to use hot-water flushing to force the contamination out of the underground soil layers has been dropped. Laboratory tests showed that excavating would be faster and more practical, said Harris.

When the BN signed its cleanup agreement with the EPA in 1990, it had to agree to a \$64 million soil-incineration plan, if the \$14 million biological methods failed. But the testing showed that incineration will not take care of the ground-water contamination, which is the real problem at the site, he said.

Excavation is to start this fall at the tie plant. The excavation of a contaminated marsh on the edge of Flathead Lake will have

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ing plots may be divided into smaller units with wind breaks planted in between.

The EPA is alert to the problem of the contaminated ground water getting into the aquifer feeding Somers' new water wells. Monitoring wells have been drilled to bedrock, 40 to 60 feet down.

But the tight soils, and the discovery that the rising lake level flushes the aquifer each spring, make the EPA believe the wells are safe.

The original \$14 million cleanup estimate came from the EPA, and was for comparison purposes. The BN probably won't make public how much the extra work will cost, said Harris.



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